

Feature Address

**Senator the Honourable Joan Yuille-Williams
Minister of Community Development, Culture
and Gender Affairs**

Official Launch

ChildLine

Wednesday, September 12, 2007

**Crowne Plaza
Wrightson Road
Port of Spain**

10:00 a.m.

Salutations

It is with deep appreciation for the work of the Coalition Against Domestic Violence for Trinidad and Tobago and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) that I have accepted the invitation to deliver the feature address at today's official launch of ChildLine, a helpline which has assisted so many young persons in the past and one which I know will continue to be of service to many young persons in need. I wish however, to start by extending congratulations to the Coalition for officially launching ChildLine, as this I am sure will help to heighten public awareness of this valuable service and allow other agencies to become involved in this significant project. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to the United Nations Children Fund for the role it has played in supporting the work of the Coalition and making today's launch a reality.

A few years ago, when the Coalition took the decision to establish a hotline dedicated to the service of children of this nation, many wondered then whether the service will be effective. The Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs however, recognizing the importance of providing specialized services for various target groups, fully supported the project and willingly shared information on the operations of its own hotline 800-SAVE (7283). Indeed, 800-SAVE was meeting the needs of persons experiencing domestic violence or seeking to avoid such situations, including children. The Ministry however, welcomed the provision of a specialized hotline service for children.

Today, we are therefore extremely pleased to celebrate your achievements thus far and through the assistance of agencies such as UNICEF, the life of this valuable service can be continued.

Ladies and gentlemen, in every corner of the earth, in developed, developing and under-developed countries, children are victims of violence in domestic situations, at places of learning, in the streets of cities and villages where they live or dwell, or within the walls

of many institutions. In most of these cases, these acts of violence are largely unreported and undetected for a variety of reasons – including embarrassment, protection of the family name, threats, frustration, and in some instances lack of choices. This violence encompasses not only physical abuse, but also mental anguish with the resulting psychological scars. Many victims of violence are often maimed for life, however some are able to develop that inner fortitude to take action to stem the abuse.

The problem of abuse is widespread and its incidence not readily susceptible to precise assessment, because of its inherent private nature. It is for this reason that it is very often not reported to the authorities and is seldom the subject of criminal prosecution. Those events which are highlighted by the media are able to attract public outcry and may result in judicial action. Children are particularly vulnerable to all forms of abuse and in some instances, are regular spectators to fights and quarrels between parents, or parents and older siblings. It is often for that reason that through the eyes of a child, violence may be perceived as a private matter and remains unreported.

Ladies and gentlemen, we can no longer bury our heads in the sand and pretend that the problem does not exist in our beloved country. We recognize that failure to address the plight of the children of our nation can result in generations of adults, who have very little trust in anything or in anyone. Governments are required to act and where possible support the work of NGOs and CBOs in eradicating the problem.

It is precisely for this reason that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child on November 25, 1991, approximately two years after this Convention was adopted by the UN General Assembly. That Convention which clearly defines the basic human rights to which all children are entitled, is a major platform on which we can stand in defence of the children of our nation.

Without our children we have no future. This is why children feature so heavily in the work of the international agencies, including the United Nations. In fact, the Millennium

Development Goals clearly identified strategies which must be addressed if countries are to be truly considered as being developed. Additionally, the World Fit for Children document identified four priority areas for action in the best interests of children during the decade 2001-2010. Among those areas for action is protecting children against abuse exploitation and violence.

As a Government, we have a responsibility to the children of this nation, to protect them from all forms of abuse, whether it is perpetrated in public or in a private space. We are bound by our commitment to several international agreements, to ensure that children rights are met and in a satisfactory manner. We are also bound by the principles of our own Constitution and our Vision 2020 goals to protect our children. These are however, all documents which are based on the principles of human rights, justice and equity. What is required is translating words into action.

Today's exercise is certainly a step in the right direction. As an NGO, you have decided that all stakeholders must play a vital role in protecting our children and have sourced the necessary funding to sustain the hotline service.

I am fully aware of the technical and financial resources required to operate a twenty-four hour hotline service. So UNICEF's assistance which allows you to operate for longer hours daily, as well as on weekends and public holidays, is to be highly commended.

I have noted in your correspondence dated August 9, 2007 that for the period 2005 – 2006, over fifty seven hundred (5700) calls from vulnerable and at risk children and adolescents were made to the line. Of particular interest is that over four hundred of them were affected by gender –based violence, such as rape, incest, domestic violence and unplanned pregnancies, this at the hand of family members, partners and friends.

In reviewing data emanating from the Domestic Violence Hotline, 800-SAVE, for the period January 1, 2006 to December 31, 2006, it was observed that five hundred and forty one (541) children, representing 28% of the overall clients for that particular period had

accessed the service. Of these, 352 were female and 188 were male. These children had reported a myriad of abuse ranging from physical and sexual abuse to eviction. Though the possibility of double-counting may exist, the reality is that children are crying and reaching out to someone to talk to, as many times close friends and members of their families may have failed them.

Help lines are providing that service in a safe and confidential manner. More particularly, hotline workers with specialized training in addressing child-related matters of abuse are vital, if there is to be any hope of restoring those broken vessels.

To reduce the incidence of child abuse, in the long term, in the long term, we must however look beyond the services being provided by ChildLine and other similar agencies and seek to address those factors which contribute to the violent or abusive action in the first place.

We need to reflect on the messages we give to our boys and girls. Are we building their self-esteem, or are we destroying it? Are we as elders encouraging our young women and men to strive for excellence, or are we allowing them to become drawn into a world of sex and other unwanted sexual activities? What are our views on child labour and have we considered how this would impact on the entire family and the nation as whole? These are just a few questions among many that we can ask ourselves.

Do we think we have a role in helping in such situations? Are there programmes or projects which can be developed to assist in reducing the levels of violence against children? I am sure we have answers to these questions.

What is required though is an integrated and co-ordinated approach in the provision of services, since the creation of services and support for victims and sanctions for perpetration require the interlinking of a number of agencies and services.

It is in recognition of this that the Draft National Gender Policy identifies, that in an effort to address gender-based violence, measures are needed to modify deeply entrenched cultural notions of men and women which lead to inferiority or superiority ideas and practices. Additionally, the policy document proposes that public education is critical if there is to be a better understanding of the widespread and devastating nature of the problem. It can be done. We are all responsible for our nation's future and must play apart.

Your role may be ensuring that there is a centralized data collection mechanism which can provide feedback to all stakeholders, or it may be the provision of training to the hotline workers, or it may be ensuring that the telephone systems do not fail, as within that period, a life can be lost.

Your role may be to support the Coalition financially, or the creation of advertisements, or the conduct of research. Whatever is your responsibility, do it for our future generations.

Thank you and God Bless You All.